

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

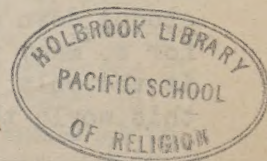
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"PLOWBOY" RELIGION*



We have with us this morning as our special guests some men who are going to China to give their Christian testimony in the relief of human suffering. They will assist in the reclaiming of 2,000,000 fertile acres of land in Honan Province, China. This land was inundated when the great Yellow River was deliberately loosed from its dykes in 1938 as a part of the scorched earth policy to halt the Japanese invasion. It did not stop that invasion. When the war raged on for seven years the once fertile land became a corridor of famine. The Chinese have made heroic efforts to close the milelong breaks in the dykes and get the land back into production. The water buffalo, which is the normal beast of burden, was slaughtered off during the war and Chinese men and women have been dragging their plows across their own backs.

The men will assist the Chinese in the use and maintenance of tractors. They hope to see 2,000 tractors put into steady use and the 2,000,000 acres again producing food to relieve human hunger. The next few weeks they are to be trained in the scientific operation of tractors. This week they have been briefed upon the current problems confronting China and have been struggling to get some knowledge of that language. They have been warned that life will be primitive and rugged, that health conditions will be hazardous, that most of the refinements and comforts which we enjoy will be unknown. They will set out on a task in which the work is hard, life arduous, and the future uncertain. They will work without compensation.

As I prepared to speak to you for them and to them for you I was made to ask myself the following questions:

- "What moves a fellow to do this kind of thing?"
- "Of what life principles is this practical service the outgrowth?"
- "What elements in our Christian faith make this work a most sensible way to help relieve the awful agony of hunger and death which have gripped the earth?"

I sought to analyze the factors and the faiths which urged them on in this humanitarian and Christian service.

*A sermon by the Rev. Harry K. Zellers, Jr., pastor of the Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren, Elgin, Illinois. Early in the summer of 1946 a group of fifteen young men of five different religious denominations were trained and commissioned to go to China as Christian "plowboys". On the morning of their departure they were guests of the Highland Avenue Church, and the pastor, Rev. H. K. Zellers, Jr. delivered this sermon as a parting message to them.

I

These men believe that the soil is the basis of all physical existence. It is that love of and trust in the land which is intrinsically Chinese and characteristically Christian. This faith in the soil is given delightful literary expression in Margaret Mitchell's "Gone With the Wind", where one sees old Gerald O'Hara walking with his daughter, Scarlett, across the brick red fields of the Tara plantation in Georgia. He loves that red earth. He fears his daughter may not love it as he does. As they cross the brow of the rolling field Gerald O'Hara stoops down and scoops up a big handful of the red clay which has grown his cotton for so many years. He looks long at that handful of soil. At last he says, "Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything, for 'tis the only thing in this world that lasts, and don't you be forgetting it!"

But unfortunately stewardship of the soil across the centuries has been so faulty that today the soil is eroded, or pockmarked with artillery bursts, or glazed over with the glassy remains of the smelted heat of atomic explosion, or bled white by the scurvy of revolution, or scorched, wasted and ravaged by war to such an extent that millions of people are hungry. In the beginning God set man down in a garden eastward in Eden. There he caused to grow every tree pleasant to the sight and good for food. A blanket of deep green covered the earth and the full virile verdure graced the horizon. The water was cool and plentiful. But the Mesopotamia Valley, cradle of eleven civilizations, became the graveyard of them all. Walter C. Lowdermilk surveying man's misuse of the soil down thru the centuries has been moved to say that if Moses had foreseen what was to become of the Promised Land and to other lands because of suicidal agriculture, greedy cultivation, and the scourging of the land because of the war, he would have been inspired to deliver a XIth Commandment:

"Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. Thou shalt safeguard thy fields from soil erosion, thy living waters from drying up, thy forests from desolation, and protect thy hills from overgrazing by the herds, that thy descendants may have abundance forever. If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, thy fruitful fields shall become sterile stony ground and wasting gullies, and thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from off the face of the earth."*

We have seen again what the ravages of war and the greeds of men can do to the good earth. The men of Tractor Operators in China are giving of their service in the faith that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, that in the good earth there is enough and to spare, and that ours is a stewardship to till the soil until men shall no longer hunger.

II

Those who enter a work of this nature place a high faith in the need for men to cooperate with each other. Each race and nation has its gifts to offer to the world family. It ill behooves any one nation to suppose that it has it in its power to be always on the giving end and never on the receiving end. It is that kind of arrogant self-sufficiency which allowed H. V. Kaltenborn to declare that the atomic bomb was the product of Anglo-Saxon scientists when in fact only one of the top twelve scientists at Los Alamos was Anglo-Saxon either in birth or heritage.

We must remember that the service which these men are giving and we are

*See Sept. 1942 Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin No. 74.

backing up is a sharing process. I take it that they will not be minded to think -- nor will we -- that because at this moment we have resources and food stuffs which the Chinese have not that we are indulging in a benevolent paternalism -- the kind of thing which the Chicago Tribune always accuses soft-hearted, easy-to-touch old Uncle Sam of doing -- which pours our gold and energy and mechanical skill down the rat hole of some other country's need, draining off our resources to build up those of another country so that in the end we shall not be America First.

I would not belittle the fact that America has much to offer in money, material resources, and mechanical know-how. Two thousand tractors are something to write home about. And the knowledge of how to swiftly reclaim vast acreages of spoiled land at this juncture of the world's hunger is no mean gift to carry in your hands. In addition to what you shall bring there will be others whose gifts to the Chinese will mean the difference between life and death for multitudes of people.

But I would not want you to forget that China also has great gifts to offer to the world family. Your briefing course on this great nation has revealed to you that this sleeping giant of a country has a vast geographical area, an almost uncountable population of patient suffering people, and a civilization and culture which were old when Christ was born. Do not dismiss lightly the great heritage of a nation like China. It has had the character to withstand the elements, undergo changing dynasties, survive invasions and wars for literally milleniums of history. You would do well to absorb some of these finer elements of its national character and thereby learn some lessons of existence by which our nation at the tender age of only 170 years shall live for centuries. Was it not Confucius who said, "It is square men, not square acres which make a great country." Or, consider that other word attributed to him: "My son, that which thy father hath bequeathed unto thee must be earned anew if thou wouldst keep it."

This cooperative approach to human problems in which men work out their concerns mutually demands not only that both partners give and take but also that each put in to the task his best. You shall be good workmen. And if so be that life is more than food, and the body more than raiment, as Jesus said, you have more to give than mere mechanical twists. I trust that you will do more than plow dirt in China, or even teach others to plow which is better still. Our world is tottering and it is no use thinking it can be put together with a few ploughed furrows and a couple of hundred tractors. You shall fulfill the full function of Tractor Operators in China only if you give evidence of a deeper insight into what holds the world together than merely wheels and engines. Our world is groping for a philosophy of brotherhood, a doctrine of the equality of all races and peoples, and a profound faith that the ultimate resources of life are spiritual. I trust that this faith in you will be as much in evidence to the Chinese as your ability to guide a tractor around.

III

The spirit insight of Tractor Operators in China is that of men with broad spiritual insight. To them God is the source of all things. The creative processes of nature are sacred. To them the earth is holy. There are men of humanitarian motives to whom religious sentiment does not cut a very wide swath. But those who really help their fellows from the mere humanitarian point of view are few and far between. The drive really to help somebody else in distress comes from the religious concept of life which puts God, the Creator, as the center and source of all things. There is a familiar verse which seems a fitting expression of this faith for the men who are giving their labor in cooperation with other men in order that the good earth may yield food for the hungry. It is such a

simple verse, but so meaningful.

Back of the loaf is the snowy flour
And back of the flour is the mill
And back of the mill is the rain and shower
And the sun and the Father's will.

Not many of us feel that any hope which we could hold out with our hand would ever be enough to stem the tide of world hate and wrong were it not for this greater power at the heart of the universe and in our own hearts. The scientists' analysis that in any harvest the total labor of the farmer represents only five per cent of the energy involved in the total production of the crop is an indication of the resources which God hurls into the scheme of things on every hand. What go would 2,000 tractors do if for one season the seed's potential would suddenly become zero, the soil's mystery refuse to reveal its hidden powers, or the sun and the rain be stopped dead in their tracks? It is little use for any farmer to turn a single furrow if that other Farmer is not also fruitfully at His toil. If indeed, the stars in their courses did not eternally fight against Citera and war and famine and suffering there would be little hope that we could do anything to stay the tides of death and disaster.

You will need to remember that you struggle not alone as you hold your spade more splendid than the sword. You must drive your tractor with a greater sense of destiny than the steerer of a tank. In those hours when the work is most difficult and the task seems hopeless and you have forgotten that there are those of us who wish you well in your mission of goodwill, never lose sight of that other Laborer, who set a garden eastward in Eden and caused it to become alive with food and fruit pleasant to the eye and nourishing to the body. He will still be at His task in the garden, nor cease from it until there is food for all. With that knowledge new life and new hope will come to you.

"As torrents in summer
Half-dried in their channels,
Suddenly rise, though the
Sky is still cloudless,
For rain has been falling
Far off at their fountains;

"So hearts that are fainting
Grow full to o'erflowing,
And they that behold it
Marvel, and know not
That God at their fountains
Far off has been raining!"